



MISHNAS CHAYIM

משנת היום

MISHNAH ON THE PARSHAH

Parshas Va'eira 5770 פֶּרֶשַׁת וַאֲרָא תַשׁ"ע

EARTHLY MATTERS

Kinnim (lice) – one of the *makkos* (plagues) inflicted upon the Egyptians – tends to be somewhat “under-rated” in the minds of some people. While no doubt uncomfortable, the notion of lice infestation may appear somewhat benign when compared with such afflictions as blood or packs of attacking animals.

A closer look, however, reveals the extent and magnitude of the devastation that accompanied this particular *makkah*. Apparently, this plague entailed more than just a mere up-tick (forgive the pun) in the local lice population.

MITZRAYIM (EGYPT) – A CREEPY PLACE

Regarding the *kinnim*, the verse in this week’s *parshah* states:

כָּל עֶפְרַת הָאָרֶץ הָיָה כִּנִּים בְּכָל אֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם.
“All the earth of the land was lice – throughout the land of Egypt,” (*Shemos* 8:13). While one could possibly have understood the verse to mean that “the earth of the land was *filled* or *covered* with lice,” Chazal emphasize that it is meant to be taken quite literally: the actual dirt was transformed into lice. In other words, the creeping critters *replaced* the soil (*Medrash Hagadol*).

This phenomenon presented some interesting *halachic* ramifications. These are revealed through the conversation that took place between Ya’akov Avinu and his son Yosef toward the end of the former’s life.

In parshas Vayechi, Ya’akov beseeched Yosef, expressing his fervent desire to be buried in Eretz Yisrael. “Please, do not bury me in Mitzrayim (Egypt),” he exhorted (*Bereishis* 47:29). The

patriarch’s aversion to the idea of Mitzrayim as his burial site, Rashi (*ibid.*) explains, stemmed partially from his prophetic knowledge about this very plague. Ya’akov did not wish to be interred in Egyptian soil because “In the end, it shall turn to lice.”

Now, exactly what bothered Ya’akov about this arrangement is not initially clear. At the most superficial level, it would seem to have been a matter of discomfort; he did not wish that his remains be “disturbed” by these crawling creatures. Indeed, some versions of Rashi include such a phrase: “In the end, the soil shall turn to lice, *which will crawl around and under my body.*”

Such an approach, however, meets with some complications. In the Vayechi issue, we examined the question of “pain after death”: do *niftarim* (the deceased) retain any sensation after their passing? Are they capable of experiencing pain, such as the systematic decomposition of their bodies through the feasting of the worms? Many *poskim* answered in the negative, citing Ya’akov Avinu as proof. He was embalmed after his death, a process that entails certain incisions in the body – something the Tribes would not have allowed had it caused the *niftar* any discomfort. According to this view, then, it is somewhat difficult to understand Ya’akov Avinu’s opposition to burial in Egyptian soil. Granted, the prospect of lice crawling around the body might not sound particularly appealing, but after all, he wouldn’t feel it. What exactly was the big deal, then?

In typical Brisker fashion (a classic form of Lithuanian scholarship characterized by analytical precision and crisp categorization), R’ Chaim Soloveitchik (*son* of R’ Velvel, the Brisker Rav) presents a groundbreaking explanation. Ya’akov’s objection did not

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stem from discomfort or squeamishness; rather, his was purely a *halachic* concern. The laws of burial mandate that the *niftar* be interred in *adamah* – the ground. As the earth in Mitzrayim was to become lice, it would lose the *halachic* status of “earth,” rendering it unfit for containment of human remains. Desiring a *halachically* qualified burial, Ya’akov ruled out Mitzrayim (*Derech Sichah, vol. 2, Bereishis 47:29*).

THE LONG ARM OF THE LICE...

There is yet another manifestation of the remarkable extent of this plague’s parameters, reflected in a related *halachic* ramification. The Mishnah in Nazir discusses another aspect of burial *halachah*:

המוצא מת בתחלה משכב כדרכו, נוטלו ואת תבוסתו.

“One who discovers an interred body – lying prone in the regular manner – (and wishes to relocate and rebury the body somewhere else) should collect the remains together with an amount of accompanying soil.”

The commentaries explain that when moving a *niftar* to a different location, one must ensure that all parts of the remains are included in the re-internment. Therefore, the collected remains must include a certain amount of surrounding soil, which has absorbed those fluids that have seeped from the corpse.

The Biblical source for this procedure is none other than the episode at hand – Ya’akov’s exhortation to his son, Yosef, wherein he declared,

וְשָׁכַבְתִּי עִם אֲבוֹתַי וְנִשְׂאתָנִי מִמִּצְרַיִם

“And I shall rest with my fathers, and you shall carry me from Mitzrayim,” (*Bereishis 47:30*). The Gemara understands this to mean, “You shall carry *together* with me from *the soil* of Mitzrayim,” (*Nazir 65a*).

The *Be’er Basadeh* (*Bereishis, Ibid.*) explains the derivation in light of the lice issue: Ya’akov Avinu was attempting to prevent a burial in Mitzrayim even on a temporary basis. “Don’t allow me to be buried in Mitzrayim, even for a short time,” he urged his son. “For if you do, when you move me out of Mitzrayim, you will have to take along some of the surrounding soil (in consonance with the *halachah* of this Mishnah).”

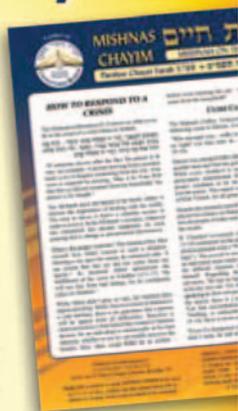
Ya’akov was urging immediate transportation to Eretz Yisrael upon his passing; delay of even a short amount of time would be deleterious. Once his body would be interred in Egyptian soil – even for just a few months – some of it would have to come out with him.

What was so bad about taking along a bit of Egyptian dirt? The *Be’er Basadeh* concludes that the lice were Ya’akov’s primary concern, which is further evidence of the reach of the *kinnim* plague. In other words, any Egyptian soil – even that which was taken out of Mitzrayim hundreds of years before the onset of the plague, and which now resided in a different country – was still subject to the scourge of lice. We see that Ya’akov was concerned that the handful of soil that would accompany him out of Mitzrayim and be included in his re-internment in Eretz Yisrael would become lice-infested – or lice-transformed – when the plague would eventually strike at the time of the Redemption from Mitzrayim.

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